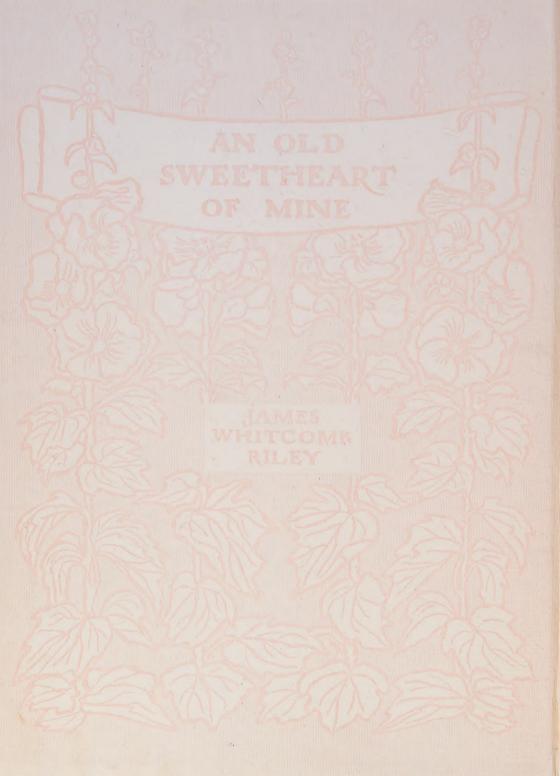




JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

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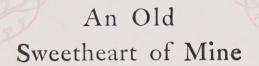


















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An Old Sweetheart of Mine

James Whitcomb Riley

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An Old Sweetheart of Mine



INSCRIBED

To GEORGE C. HITT

The beginning of whose steadfast friendship was marked by the first publication of these verses which now, expanded by writer, honored by publisher and masterfully graced by artist, seem to be a worthier symbol of the author's grateful and affectionate regard for his earliest friend



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The ordered intermingling

of the real and the dream,—

The mill above the river,

and the mist above the stream;

The life of ceaseless labor,

brave with song and cheery call—

The radiant skies of evening,

with its rainbow o'er us all.



An Old Sweetheart of Mine!—Is this her presence here with me,
Or but a vain creation of a lover's memory?

A fair, illusive vision
that would vanish into air
Dared I even touch the silence
with the whisper of a prayer?





Nay, let me then believe in all the blended false and true—

The semblance of the *old* love and the substance of the *new*,—

The *then* of changeless sunny days—
the *now* of shower and shine—
But Love forever smiling,—
as that old sweetheart of mine.





This ever-restful sense of home, though shouts ring in the hall.—
The easy-chair—the old bookshelves and prints along the wall;

The rare *Habanas* in their box, or gaunt churchwarden-stem That often wags, above the jar, derisively at them.





As one who cons at evening o'er an album, all alone,
And muses on the faces
of the friends that he has known,

So I turn the leaves of Fancy, till, in shadowy design, I find the smiling features of an old sweetheart of mine.





The lamplight seems to glimmer with a flicker of surprise,
As I turn it low—to rest me of the dazzle in my eyes,

And light my pipe in silence, save a sigh that seems to yoke Its fate with my tobacco and to vanish with the smoke.





'Tis a *fragrant* retrospection,—
for the loving thoughts that start
Into being are like perfume
from the blossom of the heart;

And to dream the old dreams over is a luxury divine—
When my truant fancies wander with that old sweetheart of mine.





Though I hear beneath my study, like a fluttering of wings,

The voices of my children and the mother as she sings—

I feel no twinge of conscience to deny me any theme
When Care has cast her anchor
In the harbor of a dream—





In fact, to speak in earnest,

I believe it adds a charm

To spice the good a trifle

with a little dust of harm,—

For I find an extra flavor in Memory's mellow wine That makes me drink the deeper to that old sweetheart of mine.



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O Childhood-days enchanted!
O the magic of the Spring!—
With all green boughs to blossom white,
and all bluebirds to sing!

When all the air, to toss and quaff, made life a jubilee
And changed the children's song and laugh to shrieks of ecstasy.





With eyes half closed in clouds that ooze from lips that taste, as well,

The peppermint and cinnamon,

I hear the old School-bell,

And from "Recess" romp in again from "Blackman's" broken line, To—smile, behind my "lesson", at that old sweetheart of mine.





A face of lily-beauty,
with a form of airy grace,
Floats out of my tobacco
as the "Genii" from the vase;

And I thrill beneath the glances of a pair of azure eyes
As glowing as the summer and as tender as the skies.





I can see the pink sunbonnet and the little, checkered dress She wore when first I kissed her and she answered the caress With the written declaration that,

"As surely as the vine

Grew 'round the stump,' she loved me—
that old sweetheart of mine.





Again I make her presents,
in a really helpless way,—
The big "Rhode Island Greening"—
(I was hungry too, that day!)—

But I follow her from Spelling, with her hand behind her—so— And I slip the apple in it and the Teacher doesn't know!



spirally and the second



I give my treasures to her—all,—
my pencil—blue-and-red;—
And, if little girls played marbles,
mine should all be hers, instead!—

But she gave me her photograph, and printed "Ever Thine"

Across the back—in blue-and-red—that old sweetheart of mine!





And again I feel the pressure
of her slender little hand,
As we used to talk together
of the future we had planned,—

When I should be a poet, and with nothing else to do But write the tender verses that she set the music to....





When we should live together in a cozy little cot
Hid in a nest of roses,
with a fairy garden-spot,

Where the vines were ever fruited and the weather ever fine,
And the birds were ever singing for that old sweetheart of mine....





When I should be her lover forever and a day,
And she my faithful sweetheart till the golden hair was gray;

And we should be so happy
that when either's lips were dumb
They would not smile in Heaven
till the other's kiss had come!





But, ah! my dream is broken
by a step upon the stair,
And the door is softly opened,
and—my wife is standing there:

Yet with eagerness and rapture all my visions I resign,—

To greet the *living* presence of that old sweetheart of mine.



















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An old sweetheart of mine

